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SUBJECT: KOLKATA MUSLIMS SING PRESIDENT OBAMA'S PRAISES, BUT WATCH CLOSELY FOR SIGNS OF CHANGE

¶1. Summary. Kolkata area Muslims came together at the American Center on Inauguration Day to perform songs and recite poetry in honor of the incoming U.S. President Barack Obama. The spontaneous display of welcome for a new American president was unprecedented in Kolkata PAS' experience. The poets and musicians recited and performed original works praising Obama's message of change. Still, some area Muslims remain distrustful of U.S. intentions. End Summary.

¶2. The Kolkata American Center was the setting for an evening of celebratory poetry and music on January 20, Inauguration Day. Several weeks earlier, the Maulana Azad Students' Organization, a local secular NGO of mostly Muslim former rather than current students, contacted the Kolkata Public Affairs Section (PAS) to say that it would like to welcome the new U.S. president on his inaugural day with a special cultural event, or "mushaira," featuring the best of Kolkata's Urdu-language literary and music scene.

"A New Sun Will Rise Named Barack Obama"

¶3. Working with Moulana Azad, Kolkata PAS invited area poets and musicians for the event. On Inauguration Day, they entertained an enthusiastic audience of more than 170 guests in the American Center's Lincoln Room. Following the performances, a buffet dinner was served, giving the attendees a chance to mingle with the performers and to get to know each other. The audience was mixed, with Muslims in the majority but also many Hindus present to enjoy the entertainment and expansive mood of the evening. Among the attendees were literary and cultural figures, students, local sports people, and past participants in PAS' International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). The General Secretary of the All-India Sufi Council, Mr. Peerzada Shibli Qasim, traveled all the way from Ajmer in Rajasthan to attend the event.

¶4. In his opening remarks, Dr. Liaquat Ali, Secretary of the Orissa Urdu Academy, paid tribute to Obama's message of hope and change. He also noted forcefully that Muslims hope the new U.S. administration will reconsider Middle East policy and adopt a new approach to the Arab-Israeli question. He specifically mentioned the recent fighting in Gaza as an issue which angers Muslims. However, Dr. Ali ended on an upbeat note, stating that the inauguration of Mr. Obama "reminds me of the famous words of Dr. King: 'I have a dream'!"

¶5. Following Dr. Ali's remarks, seven Urdu-language poets recited in turn their recent work in honor of President Obama. Their poems' central theme was optimism and hope, and that change will happen because Obama is, in the words of one poet, an ambassador for change. Another poet was even more forthright: "Now we see dawn; the new sun will rise, and that sun's name is Barack Obama." The poetry reading was followed by a musical performance, mostly in the traditional ghazal form of Urdu poetry set to music. Most of the songs performed were

traditional, although the lead singer began with a musical poem of tribute to Mr. Obama that he had composed himself for the occasion.

¶6. The mushaira received extensive, positive media coverage in three languages (English, Bengali, Urdu), with large stories and photos in newspapers and TV coverage of the performances, including interviews with Kolkata Consul General and Public Affairs Officer.

Optimism, But Distrust Lingers

¶7. (SBU) Meanwhile, there are continuing signs that, despite optimism among many in Kolkata's Muslim community about the new American president, Muslims remain wary about U.S. intentions. Earlier on January 20 a small group of madrasa students, numbering about fifty, demonstrated near the American Center. They protested U.S. and Israeli "aggression" in Gaza, and demanded that the American Center cancel the mushaira scheduled for that evening. The editors of two Urdu-language newspapers, both of whom had planned to attend the mushaira, cancelled their attendance due to the protest. While one editor privately noted that the demonstration was being organized by fringe elements within the community, he feared being branded an American supporter and financial repercussions for his paper if he were the only newspaper editor in attendance. He admitted that the Gaza issue resonates with his readership. Earlier in January, two important Imams had disinvited ConGen to visit them at their mosques, because of perceived U.S. connivance in Israeli actions in Gaza.

¶8. Comment: The fact that the Moulana Azad Students' Organization spontaneously approached Kolkata PAS with its request to honor the incoming American president with a mushaira is unprecedented in our experience. The sincerity evidenced by the poets and musicians was not feigned and was picked up by the audience. The performances became interactive, as the audience responded to particularly beautiful passages with cries of "bahut khub!" (very beautiful!) and sighs of approval. It was clear that both performers and audience, a majority of which were Muslim, are very hopeful about the possibility of change in U.S. policy towards issues that concern them, particularly Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Mr. Obama's honeymoon period may be short, as Kolkata Muslims are paying close attention to how the new administration deals with issues of interest to their community.

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